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ANTIETAM AND GETTYSBURG: TACTICAL SUCCESS IN AN OPERATIONAL VOID

by

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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract of
ANTIETAM AND GETTYSBURG: TACTICAL SUCCESS IN AN OPERATIONAL VOID

The Battles of Antietam and Gettysburg are widely recognized as tactical victories for the Union's Army of the Potomac. Following both battles, however, the respective commanding generals, General McClellan and General Meade, were sharply criticized for having failed to vigorously pursue General Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia in order to deliver a decisive blow. Both Union commander's offered a list of extenuating circumstances, such as battle fatigue, large casualties and lack of supplies, which precluded a "premature" pursuit of General Lee.

Upon examination, however, their inability to conceptualize a decisive pursuit of General Lee's army points to a direct failure at the operational level of war. Both Union generals were unable to link their tactical victories to any larger strategic objective. The reasons for this stem from the strategic confusion of a conflict evolving from limited war to total war, and from the void in operational training that left both McClellan and Meade ill-prepared to perform successfully at this critical level of warfare.

Examining this operational void, it becomes apparent that a commander's construct of war must be complete, that is, fully cognizant of the strategic, operational and tactical levels of war, in order to achieve success beyond the limits of the tactical battlefield. Such an examination points to the criticality of the operational level of warfare, highlights the importance of the commander's concept of operations and suggests that an operational commander must grow in the sense that his cognitive processes must be tuned into the dynamics of his environment, not only on a tactical level, but on the operational and strategic level.

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I. THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR AND THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL OF WAR.

A relative latecomer to the body of theoretical discussion on the nature of war, Operational Art "came of age" during World War Two. This "coming of age" evolved from discussions on the original works of Field Marshal Helmuth Von Moltke Sr. and the Soviet theoretician A.A. Svechin.

Von Moltke and Svechin had discerned that future wars would differ greatly from the Napoleonic struggles that pitted a nation's one great army against the enemy's one great army in a series of battles or perhaps in one decisive battle that would destroy or incapacitate the enemy. Despite this new reasoning, however, the concept of the operational level of war lay undeveloped. This was true until the scope of the battlefield and the size of the armies during World Wars One and Two propelled the applied operational level of war into full view.

By the mid-20th century, out of the necessity for coordinating, training, mobilizing, supplying, deploying and commanding numerous, large armies dispersed over vast theaters of war, operational art, in both structure and function, emerged as a tangible level of warfare. As the experiences of World War Two proved, time and time again, this "new" level proved critical to facilitating the tactical efforts of numerous, specialized and often dispersed warfighting units toward strategic objectives.

By the 1980's the United States Army had fully incorporated the concept of the operational level of war into its doctrine. The 1982, and later, the 1986 edition of the FM 100-5 drew on the experiences of the World Wars to project operational art as that which "concerns the design, organization and conduct of major operations and campaigns..."¹ "Thus,"

concluded Adams and Newell in their study of Operational Art, "the operational level of war properly relates to the strategic aim.... and it must be included in any American construct of war that pretends to completeness."²

The Army's doctrinal evolution toward "completeness" was not a smooth one, however. Indeed it proved to be a costly one. The Vietnam War and the subsequent 1976 edition of the FM 100-5 both reflected a "preoccupation" with the tactical level of warfare. Though the Vietnam War did involve some operational planning "the apparent confusion over strategic objectives made it largely ineffective."³ Additionally, prior to the Vietnam War, "the Army recognized nothing larger than a corps in its combat doctrine."⁴ The result, concluded Adams and Newell, was a critical void in the Army's study of war, leaving its officers ill equipped to deal with the operational level of war, even though, "paradoxically, US Army officers were commanding, and US Army staff officers were serving, at the Army group and field army level, that is, at the operational level of war, in combined and joint commands in Korea and Europe."⁵ The preoccupation with tactics, at the expense of operational conceptualization, in a strategically confused conflict was a deadly combination for the United States. Fortunately, claimed Adams and Newell, this situation was an "aberration" in the US Army's study of war.

This paper will argue that such a situation was *not* an aberration. The evidence for this claim lies in an analysis of the US Army's performance during the American Civil War, a full one hundred years before the United States began its slide into its tactical preoccupation in Vietnam. Specifically, this can be examined by analyzing the Army of the Potomac's actions following the Battle of Antietam in September of 1862

and the Battle of Gettysburg in July of 1863. Both battles were fought, significantly, for students of the operational level of warfare, as the centerpiece of a larger "campaign," and both Union commander's met with the bitter historical verdict of having failed to capitalize on the opportunity to deliver a final, decisive blow to General Lee's Army of Northern Virginia and end the war.

It will be argued that, like the Vietnam War, the American Civil War suffered from strategic confusion as the war evolved from a limited war to the full conflagration of total war. The strategic confusion caused by this evolution greatly effected the perceptions, expectations, plans and inevitably, the performance of both General George B. McClellan at Antietam and General George G. Meade at Gettysburg. It served to obscure and distort centers of gravity and both operational and strategic objectives. Furthermore, it inhibited the development of the requisite operational intelligence, operational logistics and operational maneuver that an effective pursuit of General Lee and his Army demanded.

Of fundamental importance to this last claim, the US Army prior to the Civil War, and despite the operational experience of the Mexican War, did as little to prepare its officers for the operational art in the Civil War as it did for its officers entering the Vietnam conflict. Tactics as a theoretical body of study, though austere, were fundamental for the pre-Civil War West Point graduate. Doctrinally, the corps level was the preeminent unit of study, despite the fact that the Union Army would deploy upwards of a dozen field armies during the Civil War.

Perhaps history has been less critical toward the omission of operational level training during the Civil War than it has for the Vietnam era simply because Civil War commanders and planners had less

experience and history to draw on to formulate a cohesive study and implementation of the operational level of war. Indeed, prior to the Civil War, Helmuth von Moltke himself was only in the embryonic stages of operational thought, having just begun to ruminate on the impact that railroads, the telegraph and rifled, breach loading weapons were having on the very nature of warfare.

Still, Civil War commanders, it can be argued, entered the Civil War ill equipped to deal with, or perhaps even to recognize, the operational level of war. Their "construct of war" was incomplete, due to the underdeveloped nature of operational warfare both as a body of thought or as an applied art. Their success or failure in many ways depended on their ability, often in the midst of unprecedented carnage, to perceive, learn, formulate and apply something fundamentally different than scientific, Jominian tactics or Napoleonic strategy. To this end both General Ulysses S. Grant and General Robert E. Lee would prove infinitely skilled, but it proved a task too great for Generals McClellan and Meade. Unfortunately for McClellan and Meade, history has judged them severely, often without regard for their "operational handicap." Perhaps this is because both Grant and Lee had overcome these same handicaps and because, as so often happens, political expectations frequently outpace an ill-prepared commander's perceptions of the art of the possible.

The Battles of Antietam and Gettysburg are universally regarded as tactical Union victories. Some historians begrudgingly concede this point only after acknowledging that Union casualties in both battles were crippling and that Union opportunities for defeating the Army of Northern Virginia were consistently frustrated. Particularly at Antietam, it is argued that, though fought as an offensive battle from the Union

standpoint, the close of the battle found Union troops on the defensive on all fronts. By the accepted standard of the day, however, it was the Army of the Potomac that was in possession of the battlefield at the conclusion of each battle. Furthermore, as a result of both battles, General Lee was compelled to abandon his campaigns in the north, leaving a great portion of his operational and strategic goals unfulfilled.

History's verdict has been unkind to McClellan and Meade, however, because of the perceived missed strategic opportunity. This opportunity, present at both Antietam and Gettysburg, is summed up succinctly in a letter from Abraham Lincoln to General Oliver O. Howard in July of 1863. Though referring to Gettysburg, Lincoln could easily have been referring to Antietam when he stated,

"I was deeply mortified by the escape of Lee across the Potomac, because the substantial destruction of his army would have ended the war, and because I believed, such destruction was perfectly easy... Perhaps my mortification was heightened because I had always believed... that the main rebel army going north of the Potomac, could never return, if well attended to..."⁶

Lee's "escape" not only after Antietam but again, after Gettysburg left Lincoln crushed and bewildered, for he clearly believed that north of the Potomac, Lee's vulnerable lines of communications and his tenuous logistical situation would make him easy to isolate, corner and destroy. Badly mauled after both Antietam and Gettysburg and faced with the cumbersome, time-consuming requirement to move his retreating army, its supplies and its ambulances across a great river, Lincoln perceived that Lee would never again be maneuvered into so tight and precarious a situation.

In the end, however, Lee was not "well attended to," escaping, despite the tactical defeats that precipitated his retreats. But if the

Battles of Antietam and Gettysburg were tactical victories then it follows that any failure to achieve greater results must lie elsewhere. Was this failure at the strategic level or perhaps at a heretofore unrecognized level of warfare - the operational level?

The answers to this question will serve at once to define a tangible *operational* level of war and point to its criticality in achieving success at the strategic level. Furthermore, if tactical success is to be linked to the strategic aims, then the student of military history would do well to examine those instances where the operational level failed to achieve this link. This, in many ways, may prove more insightful than studying successful operational achievements, as it is more analytical and intuitive and less prescriptive.

Additionally, failure at the operational level provides great insight into the nature of operational leadership. As a facilitator between tactics and military strategy, operational leadership emerges as those qualities a commander brings to the field as he directs and coordinates military actions to achieve strategic goals. But these qualities are affected by the lucidity of the strategic objectives, the proper identification of centers of gravity and by the training and experience that a commander brings to bear when confronted by combat. Should the strategic goals prove unclear or the centers of gravity obscure, the operational leader is thus at a disadvantage. The same is true if his training and experience are lacking with regard to the nature of any of the three levels of warfare he must connect, the tactical, operational and strategic. Are McClellan and Meade vindicated to some degree due to strategic confusion or the Army's void in recognizing and training toward the emerging operational level of war, or is it incumbent upon the

operational leader to clarify the strategic concept and extrapolate embryonic operational developments to full gestation and applied reality? Intuitively, logic dictates that difficulties would undoubtedly arise when a commander is dealing with risk assessment in an unknown level of warfare. Faced with this "unknown," a commander's estimate of the situation might, therefore, tend to be more cautious and conservative.

II. TACTICAL RESERVES AND THE SEEDS OF OPERATIONAL INERTIA

The Battle of Antietam, from the Union perspective, was fought on the offensive against Confederate defensive positions lined northwest to southeast along Antietam Creek. General McClellan's tactics were sound, attacking the Confederate left flank with General Hooker's I Corps, General Mansfield's XII Corps and General Sumner's II Corps, while General Burnside and the IX Corps attacked the Confederate right flank. Against the Confederate center, Generals French and Richardson of Sumner's Corps led their errant divisions against the Confederate stronghold at Bloody Lane.

Had the Union attacks been coordinated and better timed, the results at Antietam would, in all likelihood, have been more decisive and less bloody, as McClellan had the numerical superiority; though at the time he thought just the opposite. But McClellan's attack bogged down into three separate engagements rather than one coordinated effort, giving Lee the opportunity to skillfully move forces on interior lines to support the area of heaviest attack. This enabled thin gray lines of defenders to hold off superior Union numbers at each major engagement during the day.

Yet, despite the uncoordinated Union effort and the advantage it gave to Lee, the Union Army succeeded in breaking through the Confederate center. Persistent Union advances frustrated the Rebel effort to keep the

culminating point of French's and Richardson's attack in front of their defenses at Bloody Lane. Tenacious in their frontal assault and aided by a costly misunderstood Confederate order, Union forces broke through on the south end of Bloody Lane, enfilading and routing the Confederate defenders. As the Rebels withdrew, a concerted Union drive was all that was needed to implode the Confederate center and precariously expose the Rebel flanks. It was at this point that McClellan found himself faced with a crucial decision. Should he commit his reserves?

Less than a year later, General Meade, though in somewhat different circumstances would find himself confronted by a similar opportunity and the same question.

General Meade, unlike McClellan, fought his *magnus opus* on the defensive. Following an initial day of accidental collision and fierce conflict, Union forces fell back upon the so-called "fishhook" defensive position on Cemetery Ridge between Culp's Hill to the north and Little Round Top to the south. On the second day of the battle, Lee's offensive tested and thinned Union defenders on the fishhook's extreme left and right flanks. The final day of battle at Gettysburg began with a tremendous Confederate artillery barrage as a prelude to General George Pickett's massive frontal assault on General Winfield Scott Hancock's II Corp at the Union center.

Having deceptively husbanded a substantial supply of artillery and cannister shells, despite a vigorous response to the Rebel barrage, the Union artillery greeted Pickett's men with a ferocious hail of double cannister as they approached the Union position. This was followed by a resolute and inspired performance by the Union infantry. In the end, Pickett's tactical culmination point lay short of his desired objective.

somewhere in the bloody field between the Emmitsburg Road and Cemetery Ridge.

Both McClellan and Meade had forces at hand to deal with their opportunities and both had subordinates urging action. At Antietam, McClellan had two full Corps not actively engaged in the battle - General Franklin's VI Corps in reserve supporting the Union right flank and General Porter's V Corps guarding the Antietam line and the Army's trains. General Franklin, for his part, was anxious to resume the attack on the Confederates left flank, a move that indirectly would have enhanced General Richardson's breakthrough in the center, if indeed McClellan would not opt to simply send Franklin or Porter directly to Richardson to take direct advantage of the breakthrough. As two Confederate soldiers summarized the situation, "There was no body of Confederate infantry in this part of the field that could have resisted a serious advance." "Lee's army was ruined, and the end of the Confederacy was in sight."⁷

But General Sumner, demoralized by the carnage resulting from the earlier assault on the Confederate left, strenuously objected to offensive movement, arguing that merely defending the Union position on this part of the field would prove difficult. McClellan, shaken by the scale of bloodshed on the field that morning and ever wary of the specter of Lee's alleged, but non-existent, massive reserve force, held Franklin at bay, concluding that "it would not be prudent to make the attack."⁸ Nor apparently did it seem prudent to McClellan to send Porter to assist Richardson in exploiting the remarkable breakthrough. In the end, Richardson was left to his own resources, which soon dwindled under the weight of growing fatigue, diminishing ammunition and mounting casualties. Richardson understood that Lee's center was held by little more than a

thin and quickly constructed artillery line, but the push that could easily break it never came. Early in the afternoon, Richardson was mortally wounded and the Union's first great opportunity was gone.

When General Burnside, late in the day, finally broke through on the Confederate right, his advance was halted by the timely arrival of Confederate General A.P. Hill's division from Harper's Ferry. Again McClellan opted not to commit Porter's Corps. As "they are the only reserves of the army; they cannot be spared."⁹ McClellan's rationale, again, reflecting a preoccupation with a belief that Lee vastly outnumbered him, betrays a mindset concerned less with winning victory than with avoiding catastrophic defeat.

Meade responded similarly to his great opportunity. This, despite numerous pleas from his commander's to exploit the tactical success at Gettysburg. Cavalry commander Alfred Pleasonton urged Meade, "Order the army to advance, while I take the cavalry and get in Lee's rear, and we will finish the campaign in a week."¹⁰ General Hancock made a similar appeal. Severely wounded while commanding the forces repulsing Pickett's Charge, Hancock urged Meade to send the reserves, General Sykes' Fifth Corps and General Sedgewick's Sixth Corps, at the Confederate position on Seminary Ridge directly on the heels of Pickett's retreating survivors. "If the VI and V Corps have pressed up, the enemy will be destroyed."¹¹ He added that Lee was "in no condition to withstand a determined attack," citing as an example that the Rebels were low on ammunition, the fact that his own injuries resulted from being shot with a "tenpenny nail."¹²

Meade opted not to counterattack, however. Like McClellan he perceived his battle less a campaign by a Union field army and more as a tenuous and decisive battle for nothing less than the nation's survival.

With survival in the balance it was more prudent to be cautious, husband resources and hold reserves to counter any unforeseen events that could lead to catastrophe and a counterattack on Baltimore, Philadelphia and the Capitol.

Such a counterattack was to come, presumably, by Lee's own army. Both McClellan and Meade guarded against this eventuality despite the evidence that Lee had lost 11,000 and 22,000 men respectively at Antietam and Gettysburg, in each case almost a full third of his force. Such was the Union commander's state of mind due, again, in large part to gross overestimates of Lee's initial strength but also to a sense of the invulnerability of the Army of Northern Virginia. Having suffered the humiliation of defeat at the hands of the Confederate Army, the Army of the Potomac, even as late as July 1863, had not yet come to grips with the realization that General Lee and his army could be defeated. For McClellan and Meade prudence dictated that they hold their reserves in abeyance, despite the fact that with small chance to maneuver and none at all to retreat the Confederates were in a position where "victory would yield but little profit and defeat would mean annihilation."¹³

In the end Meade, concluded that he would not make a mistake and prematurely switch from the defensive to the offensive. He did not want to "follow the bad example (Lee) had set me, in ruining himself attacking a strong position."¹⁴ This was a mistake that Meade himself had seen the Army of the Potomac make under other commanders while he served as a brigade and division commander during numerous frontal assaults against entrenched Confederate positions. "We have done well enough," he told Alfred Pleasonton and he held tight to his defensive position waiting, and this is significant, for Lee to make the next move.¹⁵

Carl Von Clausewitz, never one to profess absolutes in the conduct of warfare, nonetheless concluded that:

"The point at which the concept of a strategic reserve begins to be self-contradictory is not difficult to determine: it comes when the decisive stage of the battle has been reached. All forces must be used to achieve it, and any idea of reserves, of available combat units that are not meant to be used until after this decision, is an absurdity."¹⁶

Though Clausewitz was not widely read at this point in time, it was clear to men like Franklin, Pleasonton and Hancock that a decisive point had been reached, a culmination point on an operational level. The initiative, the opportunity, must not be squandered. The reserves must be sent in. Though McClellan and Meade each had reserves, conservatively, in excess of 22,000 men, both opted not to commit them to the battle.

As tactical commanders McClellan and Meade had each witnessed, first hand, carnage of an unprecedented scope. The battle of Antietam remains to this day, the single most bloody day in American history with casualties on both sides totaling over 22,000 men. Gettysburg's three days of violence accounted for almost 50,000 casualties, only some 6,000 short of the total fatalities suffered during the entire Vietnam War. The "psychology of blood" and the sense of tremendous loss had demoralized front line fighting men like Generals Hooker and Sumner and, it can be argued, figured heavily into the decisions not to send reserves to the decisive points at Antietam and Gettysburg.

As tactical commander's both McClellan and Meade had a tremendous amount of respect for General Lee and shared, subconsciously if not consciously, a respect for Lee's army born of its apparent invincibility as demonstrated on every battlefield. McClellan and Meade may both have been hesitant because, with the exceptions of Antietam and Gettysburg, Lee

had routinely proved himself victorious, often emerging from a precarious position by a masterful flanking maneuver or the timely arrival of reserves. There can be little doubt that such Confederate feats weighed heavily on the risk assessments that both McClellan and Meade undertook.

But as operational commander's McClellan and Meade were obligated to see beyond the immediate battlefield to formulate the next moves that would link their tactical successes to achieve or approach their strategic goals. To this end, their actions and, more pointedly, their inactions would betray the confusion in their strategic concept and their lack of operational insight.

Having passed on resuming the tactical initiative at Antietam, and refusing to resume the battle on 18 September, McClellan enabled General Lee to roll up his forces and retreat the less than two miles to Boteler's Ford on the Potomac River. Operationally, if McClellan was to exploit his tactical victory at Antietam, he would have to pursue Lee in Virginia.

For Meade, however, the situation was quite different. With no Union counterattack on the 4th of July, Lee, again, began a retreat to the Potomac. The Confederate crossing at Falling Waters near Williamsport, however, was some twenty miles away, affording Meade the opportunity, through decisive maneuver and pursuit, to bring the battered Army of Northern Virginia to battle north of the Potomac once more.

For both McClellan and Meade, an effective pursuit of the Army of Northern Virginia required a commitment to a clear operational concept. It also required the conviction that maneuver, intelligence and logistics on an operational level could be formed into a proactive design that could quickly precipitate, support and sustain another tactical engagement on

terms favorable to the Army of the Potomac. On both counts, however, the Union commanders were ill served.

III. STRATEGIC CONFUSION AND THE OPERATIONAL VOID.

James McPherson has concluded that "amateurism and confusion characterized the development of strategies"... during the Civil War.¹⁷ Unschooled in strategic thought, Army officers were immersed in tactical studies, absorbing Jominian principles from the teachings of Dennis Hart Mahan and the writings of General Henry W. Halleck. Assignments to garrison duty or Indian fighting did little to improve the void of strategic thinking within the ranks of future Army leaders. In the end, and despite the experience of the Mexican War, "the trial and error of experience played a larger role than theory in shaping Civil War strategy...(and)...the experience necessary to fight the Civil War had to be gained in the Civil War itself."¹⁸ Military strategy, as a result, evolved and adjusted as experience and war aims evolved and adjusted from limited to total war.

Limited war found its strategic champion in General-in-Chief Winfield Scott. Scott's "Anaconda Plan" of blockade, isolation and strangulation would avoid a devastating war of conquest but it suffered, as Scott knew, from the fact that it would take a long time to achieve victory; too long to quell the growing impatience of the Union press and public. Proving Scott insightful, the Union press and politicians quickly clamored for an invasion to crush the rebel army and end the war. "On to Richmond" was the common cry, fueling the perception that the Confederate Capitol was the center of gravity and the strategic objective. This seemed true, despite the fact, it can be argued, that Richmond had not yet gained critical moral significance for the Confederacy, or that the loss of its

port access or the Tredegar Iron Works would prove, at this stage in the war, fatal to the Confederacy. Still, the clamor to seize Richmond prevailed, ending Scott's hopes for a strategy of limited war. Though the Anaconda Plan would in effect be put into use, it was to be combined with an offensive strategy of invasion, aimed primarily at Richmond, to achieve what was thought would be a quick and decisive victory in one major climactic battle.

The First Battle of Bull Run dashed any Union hopes for a quick and easy victory, and over the course of the next two year, following unsuccessful attempts to seize Richmond by Pope and McClellan, it became increasingly clear that a new strategy was required. That new strategy would evolve from the already advancing mobilization of total resources occurring in both the North and the South. By 1864, when General Grant was placed in command of all Union forces, total war was the instrument for Union victory. This instrument would embrace a strategy of annihilation, exemplified with brutal clarity by General Sherman's directives at the gates of Atlanta:

"...push forward daily by parallels and make the inside of Atlanta too hot to be endured...whether we get inside Atlanta or not, it will be a used up community when we are done with it. Let us destroy Atlanta and make it a desolation."¹⁹

As strategy evolved in this way, from limited to total war, it is logical to assume that this presented certain difficulties for McClellan and Meade. The Battles of Antietam and Gettysburg were fought at perhaps the greatest state of strategic flux. For many at this juncture, Richmond still held its lure, as did the concept of a single concentrated offensive punch to knock the "ragamuffin" Confederates out in one blow.

On the other hand, repeated demonstrations of Confederate skill in battle, their resilience and daring, and the growing perception that their strategic center of gravity lay not in Richmond but "somewhere south and west of Richmond" were at this point in time reshaping strategic thought.²⁰ For Generals McClellan and Meade, as for their counterparts in the Vietnam War, linking tactics to confused and evolving strategic objectives was to engage in a dysfunctional art form.

During the Civil War this dysfunction came to light in an exchange of correspondence between President Lincoln, acting at times through General Halleck, to his field commanders. Clearly, the correspondence indicates a cognitive disconnect between Washington and the Army of the Potomac with regard to the operational objective of the Maryland and Gettysburg campaigns, the Confederate operational center of gravity, and indeed, the strategic concept of the war.

At the conclusion of their battles, McClellan and Meade dispatched official correspondence announcing the successful result of their respective battles. The wording of these announcements infuriated Lincoln and betrayed a mindset in both commanders that suggested that the destruction of Lee's army was not the *prima facie* cause for their campaign.

"Our victory was complete," wrote McClellan to General Halleck on September 19, 1862. "The enemy is driven back into Virginia. Maryland and Pennsylvania are now safe."²¹ Meade struck a similar chord when he issued his orders on July 4, 1863, copies of which went to Halleck and Lincoln. In these he thanked his army "for the glorious results of the recent operations" and then went on to spur them on to the task still

remaining, the "greater efforts to drive from our soil every vestige of the presence of the invader."²²

Lincoln was distraught. He had made it clear, both to McClellan and Meade that he considered Lee's army the operational objective. On the eve of the Battle of Antietam, he wrote to McClellan, "Destroy the rebel army, if possible."²³ To Meade, through Halleck, he urged "the literal or substantial destruction of Lee's Army."²⁴ And yet both McClellan and Meade seemed to draw satisfaction simply from having repelled the "invader" and delivered the North from danger. Lincoln took exception to the implication that the invader should be pushed back to "his own" soil, when, to Lincoln's construct, all the soil north and south of the Potomac belonged to the Union. More importantly, however, it was clear to Lincoln that both McClellan's and Meade's purposes concerned pushing "the enemy across the river again without further collision, and they do not appear connected with a purpose to prevent his crossing and to destroy him."²⁵

Lincoln's judgement was made known to both McClellan and Meade through the official correspondence that flashed between Washington and Army field headquarters in the days and weeks following the battles. The chastisement angered both McClellan and Meade. And the correspondence that followed amounted to more vigorous prodding from Washington and the requisite responses that fatigue; lack of supplies, ammunition, horses and intelligence; and the need to defend the lines of communication to Baltimore and the Capitol dictated prudence and caution in avoiding any "premature" pursuit of the enemy.

Still, a cognitive disconnect concerning the Army of the Potomac's operational objective seemed clear. Meade, having some twenty miles to maneuver Lee into another battle, undertook the pursuit in full by 7 July.

four days after the Battle of Gettysburg. McClellan, however, had to contend with the fact that Lee, only two days after the Battle of Antietam, was already across the Potomac. This being the case, and despite the tactical success at Antietam, McClellan's calculations turned not to pursuit but a return to his former strategy.

In response to Lincoln's prodding McClellan reasoned he might open "a brief fall campaign, advancing on Winchester and either fighting Lee there or pushing him further up the Shenandoah Valley."²⁶ McClellan contended, however, that he could not advance, in full, on Lee for the reasons stated above and, additionally, because he required the entire upper Potomac area to be secured as a base of operations and a secure line of communication. This entailed the construction of railroad and wagon bridges over the Potomac, fortifying Harper's Ferry and improving, or in some cases constructing, railroads to improve resupply from Hagerstown and Baltimore through Winchester and into the Shenandoah. McClellan's plan was not even remotely related to a vigorous pursuit of Lee. To the contrary, such a plan would mean the Army of the Potomac would go into winter quarters. "Finally, presumably in the spring of 1863, he would return to his grand campaign against Richmond by the Peninsula route." McClellan "clings to the Peninsula," surmised one astonished correspondent writing from McClellan's post-Antietam headquarters.²⁷

Events had taught McClellan little. The scope and destructiveness of the war, the growing mobilization of full national power and Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, announced soon after the Antietam victory, had begun to change the nature of the war. But McClellan refused to adjust to these realities. He deplored the Emancipation Proclamation, informing Lincoln that:

"Neither confiscation of property... (n)or the forcible abolition of slavery should be contemplated for a moment... It should not be a war upon population, but against armed forces... Military power should not be allowed to interfere with the relations of servitude... A declaration of radical views, especially upon slavery, will rapidly disintegrate our present army." ²⁸

McClellan's opinion on the apparent contradiction between saving the Union and abolishing slavery would form the foundation of his platform, as the Democratic candidate for the presidency in 1864, as he endeavored to unseat Lincoln. But in 1862, as Lincoln's subordinate and the commander of the Army of the Potomac, McClellan's views forecast his inability to adapt to the changing situation. In addition to resisting the strategic change that Lincoln's political proclamation had brought about, McClellan indicated his continuing desire to limit the destructiveness of the war. "By conserving life as well as property, he sought to wage war... to occasion the least possible bitterness on both sides." ²⁹ "The South," he reasoned, "must be convinced by military means that secession could not succeed, but the South must also be conciliated." ³⁰ He therefore clung to the un-Napoleonic strategy of "gaining success by maneuvering rather than by fighting." ³¹ Thus, he clung to Richmond and the concept that a lower human and political cost could be achieved through maneuver, capturing what he believed was the Confederate center of gravity, highlighting the futility of secession and delivering a decisive moral blow to gain victory over the South.

But McClellan failed to view the Confederacy, and the war itself, as a whole. Had he done this, several key factors may have been implanted in his strategic thought. The Civil War, by 1862, was already a continental struggle, ranging from Texas to the Atlantic coast, and from Florida to Maryland. For the Confederacy, this implied that more than Richmond was

involved in the viability of the Confederacy's strategic position. Therefore, by extension, Richmond was less a center of gravity than originally perceived. Additionally, given the skewed "balance sheet" of resources, the Confederacy, as Grant would later conclude, "have not got army enough" to resist a concerted effort of all Union armies moving toward a common center. That "center" would be the key to denying the Confederacy the ability to fight on a continental basis and it lay, not in Richmond, but "somewhere south and west of Richmond," in the Confederate heartland of northern Georgia and the Carolinas.³²

Still, despite the changes occurring around him, McClellan clung to his belief that victory could be achieved by capturing Richmond. And in ignoring the necessity for the Confederates to operate and defend on a continental basis, he consistently fell victim to hyperinflated estimates of Lee's strength and failed to achieve an enlightened view of strategic realities. The key strategic concept was, not to capture Richmond, but, in concert with movements on the Tennessee and trans-Mississippi fronts, to press the Confederacy, force it to spread itself thin, and drive toward what Grant called "the common center." For the Army of the Potomac, this would entail a concerted drive south, drawing Lee's Army of Northern Virginia to battle, where, unable to be reinforced, it could be pushed and defeated. Defeating Lee's army was the operational objective that would open the route to "the common center" for the Army of the Potomac and would precipitate the fall of Richmond itself. Though arguably, this would not in and of itself bring about the end of the war, defeating Lee's army would open the eastern theater of operations to Union dominance, dangerously exposing Confederate forces in Tennessee, North Carolina and

northern Georgia on both flanks and precipitating a rapid Union advance of the Confederate's strategic center of gravity.

McClellan's strategic concept, however, was clearly at odds with Lincoln's and fell well short of Grant's design. Thus, McClellan could hardly be expected to link his tactical success at Antietam to a strategic windfall in defeating Lee when in fact he had not come to share the view that Lee was the operational objective. Having failed to properly identify the center of gravity at both the strategic and operational level, any success McClellan would achieve would never prove decisive. Without the proper operational center of gravity to focus his efforts on, operational victory was unlikely and tactical success, though it did occur, was doomed to die on the vine.

Though Meade, as will be shown, undertook his pursuit of Lee in a relatively more ambitious fashion, Lincoln still feared that he had not imbued Meade with the conviction that Lee's army was the objective. As late as September 19, 1863, exactly one year after Lee had escaped from McClellan and two months after avoiding Meade, Lincoln was still wrestling with the issue when he provided direction to General Halleck:

"To avoid misunderstanding, let me say that to attempt to fight the enemy slowly back into his intrenchments at Richmond, and there to capture him, is an idea I have been trying to repudiate for quite a year. My judgement is so clear against it, that I would scarcely allow the attempt to be made, if the general in command should desire to make it. My last attempt upon Richmond was to get McClellan, when he was nearer there than the enemy was, to run ahead of him. Since then I have constantly desired the Army of the Potomac, to make Lee's Army, and not Richmond, its objective point. If our army can not fall upon the enemy and hurt him where he is, it is plain to me it can gain nothing by attempting to follow him over a succession of intrenched lines into a fortified city."³³

McClellan was never convinced by such logic. As was the case during the Peninsula campaign and the Maryland campaign, he was poorly served by the

Pinkerton detective agency upon whom he relied almost solely for his intelligence, most specifically, for estimates of enemy strength. Having credited Lee with twice the strength he actually had at Antietam, McClellan now feared that Lee, having returned to Virginia, would now muster troops approaching 150,000; three times the figure he actually had available. McClellan, therefore, was even more hesitant to pursue. Specifically, he was gravely concerned about his lines of communications and his supply base for such an "ambitious" undertaking.

Having failed to fully convince McClellan of the desired strategic concept and operational objective, Lincoln endeavored to lay out an operational plan to persuade McClellan that a vigorous pursuit of Lee could be accomplished. Often he resorted to chaffing McClellan's pride, asking "Are you not overcautious when you assume that you can not do what the enemy is constantly doing?" "Should you not claim to be at least his equal in prowess, and act upon that claim?"³⁴ Lincoln reminded McClellan that Lee was operating "twice as far" from a railroad head than he, and Lee had half as many wagons as McClellan and yet Lee's army was subsisting well at Winchester. McClellan's plans to secure the upper Potomac area and improve the infrastructure, Lincoln asserted, "ignores the question of time, which can not, and must not be ignored."³⁵

Lincoln then suggested a move toward Richmond, to interdict Lee's lines of communications and he advised McClellan "if (Lee) should prevent our seizing his communications, and move toward Richmond, I would press closely to him, fight him if a favorable opportunity should present, and at least, try to beat him to Richmond on the inside track." For as Lincoln conceptualized, McClellan's route to Richmond would be that of "the chord," while Lee's was "the arc of the circle."

This conceptualization also provided Lincoln with the operational construct to address the question of supplying and sustaining the Army of the Potomac.

"Recurring to the idea of going to Richmond on the inside track, the facility of supplying from the side away from the enemy is remarkable - as it were, by the different spokes of a wheel extending from the hub towards the rim - and this whether you move directly by the chord, or on the inside arc, hugging the Blue Ridge more closely. The chord-line, as you see, carries you by Aldie, Hay-Market, and Fredricksburg; and you see how turn-pikes, railroads, and finally, the Potomac by Acquia Creek meet you at all points from Washington."³⁶

Lincoln went on to specify that if McClellan should move "by the inside arc" the Blue Ridge mountain gaps could be supplied "the same, only the lines lengthened a little..." Such a plan postulated a means of flushing the Army of Northern Virginia out to fight, while providing the Army of the Potomac with interior lines, secure communications and a track that would keep it between Lee and Washington. Should Lee move northward Lincoln advised that "he gives up his communications to you absolutely, and you have nothing to do but to follow, and ruin him; if he does so with less than full force, fall upon, and beat what is left all the easier."³⁷

Though many historians have suggested that Lincoln was obsessed with a decisive victory over Lee to the point where he oversimplified things, it is interesting that his construct is precisely what Grant embarked on in 1864. In his instructions to General Meade on April 9, 1864, Grant stated:

"Lee's army will be your objective point. Wherever Lee goes, there you will go also. The only point upon which I am now in doubt is, whether it will be better to cross the Rapidan above or below him. Each plan presents great advantages over the other with corresponding objections. By crossing above, Lee is cut off from all chance of ignoring Richmond and going north on a raid. But if we take this route, all we do must be done whilst the rations we start with hold out. By the other route Brandy Station can be used as a base of supplies until another is secured on the York or James rivers."³⁸

Grant's spring campaign of 1864 did, in fact, cross below Lee, taking the inside "chord" to Richmond. In doing so, Grant threatened Lee's communications, forced him to fight and kept a secure Union supply and communication line to Washington, just as Lincoln had suggested to McClellan in October of 1862.

In the end, however, McClellan refused to pursue. Lincoln and Halleck, having outlined the strategic concept, the operational objective and an operational plan, could not persuade him. Halleck lamented, "it requires the lever of Archimedes to move this inert mass." "I have tried my best, but without success."³⁹

But McClellan, like Meade, was a product of his time, and his time was that of the post-Napoleonic era. Both men were trained in a system and a historical context where the operational level of war was unknown. Paradoxically, the American Civil War, would place them both into command of a US Army field army, that is, at the operational level of warfare. Their experience and training, however, void of any operational study, had left them with an incomplete construct of the nature of war.

Though Jomini's influence on the Civil War is often exaggerated, the incorporation of Jominian principles, or more accurately, the principles of war, were commonplace. Tactically, "concentrat(ing) the mass of your forces against fractions of the enemy's; menac(ing) the enemy's communications while protecting your own; (and) attack(ing) the enemy's weak point with your own strength..." were fundamental to the Civil War commander.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the image of battle that Civil War commander's planned, outfitted and maneuvered for, as depicted in the Army Officer's Pocket Companion of 1862, "in terms of weapon ranges, battlefield

lethality, and numerical strength of the armies. (depicted) Napoleonic battle rather than the conditions on a Civil War battlefield."⁴¹

In line with this construct, the corps was the fundamental unit of study and design during the Civil War. Field armies were capable of independent and sustained campaign operations but they were too large to maneuver as a whole. As a result, armies were broken down into corps for routine operations, maneuvering and decentralized execution during battle. In keeping with the principles of war and the Napoleonic concept of the climatic battle, however, individual corps would be quickly concentrated when combat was imminent. To do less would be to dangerously divide your forces and invite disaster at the decisive battle.

In the context of strict Jominian tactics and Napoleonic strategy, the ideas of operational maneuver, operational logistics and an operational concept found little fertile ground. Though un-Napoleon-like in his desire to maneuver for a less destructive capture of Richmond, when it came to battle, McClellan, like his successors Pope, Burnside, Hooker and Meade, "gave themselves over to the Napoleonic mania for the climatic battle."⁴²

"The mystique of the battle - the idea that the battle was the natural object and climax of any military campaign - was so pervasive and powerful in the military world of the post-Napoleonic era that all the Federal commanders in the East...were incapable of perceiving any strategic design beyond the capture of Richmond or the grand battle in which they hoped to win their Austerlitz victory over Lee. So much did these generals regard 'the battle' as synonymous with 'the campaign' and even 'the war,' that when they lost a battle (or won one) they never knew what to do next..."⁴³

Indeed, the war up to 1863 had been what Grant called a "war of battles." And it was the belief that "the battle" was synonymous with "the war" had paralyzed both McClellan and Meade from committing reserves at the

decisive point of their battles. For if "the battle" was "the war," clearly too much was at stake to take undue risks. In the end, this equation proved debilitating for the commander's estimate of the situation and the war was prolonged by "the habit of mind that was always too busy weighing risks to grasp opportunities."⁴⁴

But when "the battle" is taken as synonymous with "the campaign" the failure at the operational level is perhaps most prevalent. From the Confederate standpoint both the Maryland and Gettysburg campaigns, were clearly that - campaigns. For each foray into the north, Lee had clearly defined strategic goals as well as operational objectives. In the Army of Northern Virginia he had the tactical prowess to engage the enemy and, perhaps most importantly, he had an operational plan to achieve his ends. Lee's plan translated his "strategic guidance into operational direction for his subordinates."⁴⁵

Ironically, during the Maryland campaign, Lee's operational plan fell into McClellan's hands - the famous Order 191. From this order McClellan knew that Lee had divided his force, using operational maneuver as a design to secure lines of communication through Harper's Ferry and Hagerstown in order to sustain operations further north. But McClellan failed to capitalize on this intelligence windfall. In Lee's boldness, he failed to see the operational level of war and interpreted Lee's actions as a gross violation of the principles of war.

Having violated the principles of war, McClellan ostensibly set out to "whip Bobby Lee." But he set no decisive plan of action. Quick, decisive maneuvering was required to fall upon Lee's divided corps and defeat them individually. McClellan's maneuvering was slow and indecisive, however. By September 15th, three days after discovering

Lee's order. McClellan's cautious and tentative advance had negated any advantage that Order 191 had given the Federals. Lee had concentrated his forces on Antietam Creek and the Army of the Potomac was concentrating to engage in the decisive battle.

It is in this sense that it becomes difficult to view the Army of the Potomac's "campaign" in Maryland or Gettysburg as a campaign. Despite, the advantages that Lincoln had pointed out with regard to Lee moving north of the Potomac, both McClellan and Meade were thinking of repelling the invaders and driving them back to Virginia. No decisive operational objective was envisioned by either federal commander. Tactically, the Army of the Potomac was to prove itself capable of successfully engaging the enemy, but operationally neither commander had any concept or plan to bring about or sustain a series of operations to exploit their tactical victory and Lee's tentative position.

Viewed from a Napoleonic construct, Union engagements prior to the Battles of Antietam and Gettysburg were minor. The Battle of South Mountain, fought two days prior to Antietam, for example, is commonly viewed as Confederate delaying action, affording Lee time to concentrate his dispersed forces. And this clash is perhaps the most significant peripheral engagement of both campaigns. Engagements after the climatic battles of Antietam and Gettysburg were just as insignificant. McClellan mounted a minor and indecisive harassing action at Boteler's ford while Meade failed to achieve any further collision with Lee or even a determined effort against Lee's rear guard.

Meade was not severely hampered by political disagreement with Lincoln or strategic confusion as was McClellan. Always the obedient subordinate, he began an earnest pursuit of Lee, as Lincoln and Halleck

had hoped, by 7 July. But he began his pursuit only after resting his troops and ascertaining that Lee had, in fact, retreated. But in waiting to ascertain Lee's next move Meade had given the Confederates a head start to the Potomac and had failed to seize the critical lines of communications that would hinder Lee's retreat and precipitate another engagement.

By subscribing to the faulty Napoleonic construct of viewing "the battle" as "the campaign," Meade's opportunities were limited simply because operationally he had no plan beyond his tactical engagement. Though Meade had performed brilliantly at Gettysburg, and he knew what he did not want to do in terms of making a mistake in Lee's front, he was uncertain about his next step after the battle of Gettysburg. Though it seems that Meade intended to fight Lee north of the Potomac, the lack of a decisive plan to bring about such a fight doomed Federal hopes of avoiding another campaign in Virginia. Void of a proactive plan, Meade reacted to Lee's movements, missing the opportunity to occupy the town of Fairfield, the Fairfield Gap and the Monterey Pass which would have forced Lee to withdraw his army on a single road, rather than the two roads that he enjoyed. These objectives could have been secured with Union Cavalry or elements of the reserve V or VI Corps. Had this been done prior to Lee's retreat, the Confederate situation would have been grave. Union forces could have beat them to the Potomac while pushing from behind with an aggressive assault on the rear guard. But Meade had also failed to clarify his intentions for attacking the rear guard. Desiring an aggressive pursuit and a general engagement of Lee's rear guard, Meade failed to clearly indicate this to General Sedgewick as he was sent off as the lead element in pursuit of Lee. Given no concept of operations for a

unified Union pursuit. Sedgewick interpreted Meade's directions conservatively, monitoring Lee, sending intelligence to Meade and avoiding a major engagement.

Though Lee still possessed a potent fighting force, a synchronized maneuver by Union forces coupled with an aggressive assault on the Confederate rear guard would have made Lee's situation untenable. Such a maneuver, however, had to have been accomplished by late evening or early morning on the 4th/5th of July.

Though Meade's training and experience had made him an effective tactical commander, his lack of operational insight and training predisposed him to slow and cautious action. Operational maneuver, key to intercepting Lee, was a tool Meade did not have. In the end, his pursuit was too late and he was compelled to parallel Lee's retreating forces, unable to bring a decisive concentration upon Lee before he rebuilt his damaged bridge and crossed a swollen Potomac river.

McClellan had an operational plan spelled out to him by Lincoln but failed to accept it. Meade had an opportunity of operational maneuver as well but did not recognize it on a map or act upon it quickly enough. And in a telling example of the operational void, both McClellan and Meade thought the maneuvers required of them to be unsupportable logistically.

Logistically, from a strategic standpoint, the Union Army had a great advantage. Ever increasing war mobilization had swelled the Union supplies of clothing, shoes, food, ammunition, field equipment and weapons. "Except in the case of horses and mules, the (Union) problem was not so much insufficient supply as it was the congestion on the railroads..."⁴⁶ Brigadier General Herman Haupt, the director of military railroads, in conjunction with Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs

worked feverishly and successfully to overcome bottlenecks and operational snags, but in both the Maryland and the Gettysburg campaigns their efforts were hampered by a lack of operational direction from the field commanders.

"It was not until three weeks after Antietam that McClellan even informed Washington of supply difficulties that were by then of long standing. He had applied no strong pressure for timely and rapid resupply for the reason that he had no immediate plans for a campaign that depended upon it; the army was unprepared for an advance simply because General McClellan had not ordered it to be prepared."⁴⁷

Similarly, Meade's concerns about replenishing and sustaining his army in its pursuit of Lee were less than proactive. General Haupt visited Meade personally at Gettysburg following the battle on July 4th. Haupt "asked Meade about his plans so that arrangements could be made for supplying the army."⁴⁸ Haupt was strongly in favor of an aggressive pursuit of Lee but was dissatisfied to learn that Meade did not intend to cut off Lee's retreat. Meade's only remark regarding future operations was the off handed comment that he planned to move his headquarters to Creagerstown later in the day. Thus, Haupt, the operational logistician who would manhandle the chaotic Union rail system in order to provide the Army with its supplies, was given no operational direction or concept at this critical juncture.

McClellan and Meade had both failed to grasp the possibilities at the operational level of war. Both were unable to formulate a proactive, decisive and comprehensive operational concept. "Without (this) sound and dominating concept of operation, no amount of command presence, personal flair....demonstrated integrity....warrior spirit, personal courage, weapons proficiency or troop morale (could) hope to compensate."⁴⁹ Unable or unwilling to "propagate (a) central set of ideas throughout the minds

of (their) subordinates." McClellan and Meade were predisposed to fail at the operational level. They were doomed to limit their "campaigns" to a single Napoleonic battle. Corps and division commanders had no concept of how Lee was to be reengaged following his tactical setbacks. Logisticians were impotent without a proactive plan to anticipate and meet the operational needs of pursuing Lee. Operational maneuver and operational logistics could easily have been applied to the objective but no concept of operations brought these fundamentals to life. Command and control was left at the tactical level to direct the conduct of battles and was never elevated to the coordination and conduct of the campaign.

IV. CONCLUSION

In the end, both McClellan and Meade had failed to learn. McClellan's "chorus of complaints about unpreparedness and his dire warning about enemy superiority were as loud in his last days of command of the Army of the Potomac as they were in his first days." "The general he was on his first campaign was as good a general as he ever became."⁵⁰ His inability to commit his reserves at Antietam and his failure to benefit from Lee's lost order had shed little light on his construct of war at any level other than perhaps the tactical.

General Meade, in Grant's words, "saw clearly and distinctly the position of the enemy, and the topography of the country in front of his own position. His first idea was to take advantage of the lay of the ground, sometimes without reference to the direction we wanted to move afterwards."⁵¹ Clearly this presents the picture of a commander who became highly skilled at the tactical level but failed to develop operational skills that would take the tactical level "to the move afterwards." Meade, concluded Grant, "was an officer of great merit, with

drawbacks to his usefulness that were beyond his control."⁵² Grant referred to Meade's training as an engineer and his limited experience in command of troops, but certainly Meade's ignorance of the operational level and his inability to develop the requisite knowledge of this critical level of warfare were fundamental to his drawbacks.

As these "drawbacks" predisposed McClellan and Meade to an inert state on the operational level, they serve in some sense to vindicate or at least explain their failure to follow up their tactical victories. Certainly it is unfounded to suggest, as the Committee on the Conduct of the War did, that somehow McClellan was unpatriotic or that Meade lacked moral courage. Such suggestions are unfounded given their record of service, and particularly in light of their ill-preparedness for the operational level of war.

It is important to note, however, that growth is a fundamental condition for the commander. It is not enough to bring the lessons of history and experience to the battlefield. The commander must utilize these assets, but he must also synchronize his cognitive processes to the dynamics of the situation he is in. Strategic confusion and an operational void left McClellan and Meade with a tactical victory and no sense of what to do next. No operational commander should be placed or place himself in this situation. To avoid such a disadvantageous predicament requires a working knowledge of the "complete" construct of the levels of warfare and a commitment to dynamic growth as a commander.

NOTES

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